

# Adoption



# Foster Care

*The mission of Children's Aid Society is to identify and provide services to improve the lives of children and their families.*

**Post-Permanency Newsletter**  
**Fall 2025**



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Model confidence, create structure, and get to know the new teacher.

Every child faces challenges when heading back to school. But back-to-school time can be exceptionally difficult for the 20 percent of children who suffer from a mental health or learning disorder.

The school environment demands many things that summer activities don't — the ability to sit still; get organized; stay on task; and adapt to a new, highly structured daily schedule. School also requires kids to separate from their parents and interact with peers — enormously challenging tasks for any child with anxiety.

Here are six things parents need to know about starting school with vulnerable children:

## **1. Mental health problems emerge at back-to-school time.**

Children with special needs require a lot of help learning how to manage a new schedule. As a parent, you can ease your child's anxiety by modeling confidence and calm behavior, and by imposing structure in family life (mealtime, homework, and bedtime routines).

But if your child shows signs of extreme anxiety and has unusual difficulties in school, you should immediately discuss your concerns with your child's teacher as well as a mental health professional, someone who can advise on whether a child's problems are normal and age appropriate or require further evaluation.

## **2. Kids' brains are changing dramatically.**

Profound changes occur in the brains of children, particularly as they enter their teens. The teen brain starts "pruning"—strengthening some synapses and eliminating many others. A temporary imbalance of this pruning in certain areas of the brain has been linked to teens' erratic and risky behaviors, as well as the onset of anxiety disorders, depression, and substance abuse.

It's important to keep communication open at this vulnerable time, when teenagers are starting to look like adults, and think they are adults, but may not have the skills to manage stress. If you haven't already started setting time aside each day to talk to your child about challenges and new experiences at school, now is the perfect moment.

## **3. Anxious parents send anxious kids to school.**

Anxiety disorders run in families. Plus, anxious people tend to marry other anxious people; children with two anxious parents are at especially high risk. But genetics are just one factor. Environment is another. Kids really *are* like sponges, absorbing the energy and adopting the behaviors around them.

One of the most helpful things you can do is model calm, confident behavior, particularly while helping a child get ready for school. A child usually starts school no calmer than their least-relaxed parent.

## **4. Teachers matter, maybe even more than you think.**

Teachers get to know a child's family through the child's eyes, and they get to know how a child behaves *without* their parent present. This means parents can get all kinds of information about a child from their teacher—information about learning difficulties and peer problems as well as academic achievements and close friendships. Teachers are allies, and you should talk to them regularly.

Good questions to ask include: How is my child doing? Do you have any concerns about their social or academic skills? Do you think they need my help with anything?

## 5. Homework time is crucial.

Young children with learning difficulties, as well as those without any documented problems, can benefit from their parents' involvement during homework time. Parents should set aside time for a structured "homework session" each evening. A good routine might start like this: Create space on a desk to work; help them clean out their backpack; review the day's assignments; and discuss the homework as well as any questions about it. You can observe your child's learning strengths and weaknesses this way while also reinforcing good study habits. Be positive and encouraging.

## 6. Don't jump to conclusions.

Kids grow and develop at different rates. Ideally, a child will acquire various skills within expected time periods, but they may develop more quickly in one area than another. Parents often worry when, for example, one 5-year-old can read fluently while another can barely sound out words on the page. But a lag in one area of development doesn't mean a child has a disorder. If you think there might be a problem with your child's development, talk to their teacher. A seasoned teacher, with about 10 years of experience, can frame your child's progress in relation to as many as 300 other kids. Good teachers are invaluable allies.



## Tough Conversations by Kim Stevens



*"I'll tell you when you are older."*

*"She'll never understand!"*

*"That's too hard/sad/scary/grown up etc. to talk about with a child!"*

*"He doesn't need to know that!"*

These are all excuses that adults give themselves to avoid talking truthfully with children in foster care, kinship care, and adoptive families about their lives and experiences, both past and present. Telling a child or youth that they can't grow up where and with whom they want can feel overwhelming. Answering hard questions or sharing realities about a child's past experiences can feel devastating. But adults need to recognize it is *their* discomfort they are ultimately responding to and not the child's needs.

With thoughtful preparation and attention to the developmental level of the child, it is possible to honor every child's right to know who they are, where they came from, what decisions are being made for them, and what the potential impact of their past has on their future. When children and youth sense that they are being shielded from hard truths, it can:

- Reduce their sense of trust in the adult
- Increase their confusion about what happened, why it happened, and when it happened
- Increase their sense of responsibility or shame about their foster care or adoption story
- Prevent them from embracing a new placement or other case-level choice

Contribute to negative outcomes in the future, as they try to understand themselves within the context of their first family. As adults, both professionals and caregivers often need help to know how to have difficult conversations—when and where to have them, what language to use, and how to support the child or youth in integrating all the pieces of their history.

### Some quick tips:

Answer the question asked, not the one you think is being asked. Do ask for clarification. A classic example of how parents can go down a rabbit hole is answering the 5-year-old's question, "How did that baby get in momma's belly and how is it going to get out?" The child is not asking for a sex education lesson. A simple answer is what they seek—"A special hug makes the baby start growing in momma and when the baby is ready the doctor or midwife will help the baby come into the world."

Avoid comments like, "when you're older," "It's not for children to think about," "I'm not allowed to share that," or any other dismissive response. Share what you can, considering what the child can understand. Above all, make sure the child knows that you are acknowledging their right to have answers. Even say, "I don't know how to explain that to you right now, but I promise I'm going to figure it out," is often enough to validate the child's feelings and needs.

Follow the lead of the child or youth, go at their pace adding more depth as the child grows and develops. Do not change the words children use to tell their story or ask questions—correcting the language can often shut down the conversation.

### Five Principles to Having Hard Conversations

The two primary factors in healing from trauma are making meaning of what happened and doing so in the context of relationships (Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 1982). This understanding is consistent for adults and children and has not changed over time.

Children and youth are never responsible for adults' actions, yet they often carry a burden of guilt and shame. It can be about what happened to them or their separation from their first families, or why they can't go home or be placed where they want. Your responsibility is to help them understand.

There are five components to doing this successfully:

- Create a safe space
- Be truthful
- Validate and affirm
- Attend to developmental stage, language, and culture
- Provide support

Creating a safe space to communicate is essential. Be mindful of triggering settings like child welfare offices and court houses. Bedrooms or other environments that bring back a memory or feeling can also be difficult. Bedrooms or other environments that bring back a memory or feeling can also be difficult. For many children and youth, movement and the ability to avoid eye contact can be helpful. A long walk or car ride can provide both. Ensure that other physical needs have been met—make sure they have had something to eat or drink, and are not too cold or hot. Eliminate distractions as much as possible; too many people, too much noise, excessive activity can all shut down a conversation. Be *truthful* and remember that withholding information is lying by omission. Share information to project. We can't protect a child from what has already happened, but we can help them understand it better and heal.

Attend to developmental stage, language, and culture as you talk. Attend to development stage, language, and culture as you talk. What is the child's emotional, social, and cognitive age? Be sure to use the language at this moment may push them into silence. Finally, be responsive to and respectful of cultural norms. What may seem out of the ordinary to you could be simply a difference in tradition or belief.

Validate and affirm the child's memory and their feelings about it. Although it's important to clarify when a child believes something that is not true, wait until a later time to add new information, especially if this is the first time the memory has been spoken of. The goal in the beginning is to assure the child that you are listening, hearing, and believing. After the hard conversation, your job is to provide support for the child or youth. Ask the child, "What do you need from me right now?" "Who else needs to know about this?" It is critical that the child or youth defines the support they need.

### Tough Topics and Suggested Messages

We often get stuck on the exact words to say. Three pieces of advice will help you get unstuck: remain calm and factual, be authentic, and understand it is an honor to be trusted with hard truths. When a child trusts you enough to confide in you, they are confirming that you are an adult they need and believe in. It's okay to be sad on the child's behalf if you do not make it about you. It is okay to be angry on the child's behalf about what happened, but not okay to talk about people they are related to with disrespect.

With each of the following questions or issues, the messages build along a developmental continuum. Below are some themes to weave into the conversations you might have.

*Why can't I see mom or dad?*

- Mom is trying to get healthy so she can be there for you.
- Right now, he isn't able to take care of you the way you need.

*What do you think needs to change in order for you to go home? How can I help? What did I do wrong?*

- What happened to you is not okay and it's not your fault.
- What do you remember about what happened? Let's talk about that.
- If this had happened to your best friend, would you blame them or feel they were responsible? If the response is "no," reinforce that they deserve the same understanding. If the response is "yes," spend time reassuring them that children and youth deserve the same understanding.

## Rape, incest, sexual abuse

- Grownups have a special way of hugging or touching that is only for grownups. Sometimes they hug or touch children in the same way and that's not okay.
- What happened to your mom is not okay and it's not your fault.
- What happened to you is not okay and it's not your fault.
- I'm sorry that happened to you. I wish I could have been there to help you.

It's my job to keep you safe. Let's talk together about the best way to do that.

Ask questions to gauge the child's understanding and emotions and know what they most want to know about. Pause at times to allow the child to process and take the time to come up with questions or comments. Check in with how they are doing.

The effort you put in to help children and youth understand their people, their past, and their journey in care or to adoption will be one of the most critical factors in how they see themselves and their future. Our responsibility is to provide the circumstances that allow for them to become their own best version of themselves. To do this, they need to understand what happened to them, have time and space to reconcile the many losses they have experienced, and be supported to build or rebuild trusting relationships with family, friends, and future partners. All of this depends on our willingness to do the hard work right alongside them.

**STATEWIDE ADOPTION AND PERMANENCY NETWORK (SWAN)**  
**POST-PERMANENCY SERVICES**

**CALL OR EMAIL THE SWAN HELPLINE**  
1-800-585-SWAN  
SWANHELPLINE@DIAKON-SWAN.ORG

**Families**  
who provide permanency for children and youth occasionally need assistance. SWAN Post-permanency services ensure families have the support they need to encourage a positive, life-long experience.  
The Pennsylvania Statewide Adoption and Permanency Network (SWAN) is a program of the Department of Human Services' Office of Children, Youth and Families.

**Support for Pennsylvania families who:**

- Adopted from foster care, privately, or internationally
- Provide formal kinship care
- Are a child's permanent legal custodian



**FREE & CONFIDENTIAL**

**1.** Contact the SWAN Helpline at 1-800-585-SWAN or swanhelpline@diakon-swan.org.

**2.** Talk to a SWAN Helpline specialist about eligibility and available services.

**3.** Choose an agency to deliver services.

**4.** Talk to the agency that reaches out to set up an appointment.

**5.** Begin services!

**BENEFITS FOR YOUR FAMILY**

- Provides education
- Addresses your specific needs
- Connects you to local resources
- Gives you tools to support and strengthen your family bond

**SERVICE BREAKDOWN**

**Case assessment** - to determine your family's needs  
**Case advocacy** - connecting your family to local resources for mental health services, educational services, birth parent conflict resolution and foster care and adoption sensitive services  
**Support groups** - a chance to meet families like yours  
**Respite** - planned opportunities to help strengthen and support your family

**CALL OR EMAIL TODAY!**



When you buy a new grill there is a booklet on how to build it and how to set it up. Get a new device and there is a QR code to link you to the manual. Unfortunately, there is no 'how to guide' for a child. Children come with their own personalities, temperaments, and learning styles.

Enroll in one of our *free* parenting classes offered at Children's Aid Society to gain knowledge and new skills on how to support your children. We have staff trained in various curriculums backed by research to help educate you on enhancing your family dynamics.

Call us today at 814-765-2686 ext. 250 for more info!

# The Importance of Spending Time Together by Parenting Focus 4/1/25



The fast pace of modern day family life can make it easy to forget that simply just spending time with our children is really important. Our time is one of the greatest things we can give them. Summer time offers lots of opportunities to spend time together and some good old family bonding! Here's why you should make quality time a priority:

## IT BUILDS CHILDREN'S SELF-ESTEEM

Children who spend time with their parents participating in activities together build a positive sense of self-worth. When children feel that they are valued by their parents, they feel more positive about themselves. Family activities don't have to be expensive or meaningful, the important part is just being together. You could go for a bike ride or play a game together.

## IT BUILDS CHILDREN'S SELF-ESTEEM

Families who share everyday activities together form strong, emotional ties. Studies have found that families who enjoy group activities together share a stronger emotional bond as well as an ability to adapt well to situations as a family. Share your favorite hobbies, sports, books, movies or other favorite activities.

## IT DEVELOPS POSITIVE BEHAVIORS

Children and adolescents who spend more time with their parents are less likely to get involved with risky behavior. According to studies done by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse via Arizona State University, teens who have infrequent family dinners are twice as likely to use tobacco, nearly twice as likely to use alcohol and one and a half times more likely to use marijuana. Children who frequently eat with their families also usually have improved dietary intake compared to those who don't eat as often with family members.

## IT ENCOURAGES COMMUNICATION

When you spend time with your children you are fostering an environment for open communication. Good communication is important for your children to feel comfortable and talking to you about anything. Simply asking your child how their day has gone makes a big difference.

## IT CAN HELP YOUR CHILD'S ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Spending time helping your children with schoolwork or reading together, especially in their early years, will foster an environment that values academics. If your child feels comfortable coming to you with schoolwork, they are more likely to perform better academically.

## IT CAN HELP YOUR CHILDREN BE A GOOD FRIEND

Children learn by example. If you are setting a good example for them by spending quality time together, they are more likely to adopt those behaviors in other relationships in their lives. Simple things like playing games together will help them understand more about interacting with others as well as teach them things like sharing and kindness. Most importantly, family time means you can just have fun and enjoy each other's company!

**DO YOU KNOW A  
YOUTH WHO  
COULD BENEFIT  
FROM HAVING A  
MENTOR?**



**YOUTH  
MENTORING**

CONTACT  
YOUTH MENTORING:  
[MENTORING@CHILDAID.ORG](mailto:MENTORING@CHILDAID.ORG)  
(814) 765-2686 EX 202



[www.childaid.org](http://www.childaid.org)

A mentorship  
bond is like a life-  
changing magic  
spell that lasts  
for eternity!